

Protecting Workers' Health in a Climate of Change: What role for trade unions?
Raquel Gonzalez
International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

Before addressing the need to protect workers' health in a climate of change I would like to briefly contextualize our discussion by providing some figures to highlight the situation of workers' health and safety

The ILO estimates that around 2.3 million women and men die every year from work-related accidents and diseases. This means that by the end of ~~this day~~ *today* nearly 1 million workers will suffer a workplace accident and around 5'500 workers will die due to an accident or disease from their work. And these numbers may well be under-estimated due to inadequate reporting and notification systems in many countries, particularly in developing countries.

In economic terms it is estimated that some 4% of the annual global gross domestic product, (USD 1.25 trillion) is spent as direct or indirect costs of occupational accidents and diseases.

There was therefore already before the current economic and social crisis a strong moral and economic case to improve workers' health and safety.

However, the/crisis may put additional challenges on the protection of workers' health.

The financial crisis may lead employers to ignore or minimize the importance of workplace safety and health. In a time of economic recession employers may be tempted to cut back on the maintenance of workplaces and equipment, they may cut on staff levels in order to save on labour costs thus increasing the pressure on remaining staff to get the work done and they may reduce expenditure on training in safe and healthy working procedures as staff cuts may also entail cuts

in training. Moreover, as unemployment increases workers may be more concerned with securing their job than with the safety and health of their working conditions.

Some categories of workers ^{are} ~~may be~~ particularly vulnerable for instance migrant workers, seasonal, casual and temporary workers who are often employed under precarious employment conditions, not organised in trade unions and often unaware of health and safety risks and their rights. Already before the crisis trade unions had stressed that deregulation of the labour markets, out-sourcing and sub-contracting had resulted in increased workers' exposure to occupational hazards and risks.

Some specific sectors known as hazardous, such as construction, mining and agriculture are also at particular risk. For instance in the agricultural sector the current crisis is adding to already existing challenges such as draughts and floods caused by climate change and is forcing workers out of employment or into accepting the poorest terms of employment in order to survive.

Global Jobs Pact

Before talking about what can trade unions do to protect workers' health and safety in times of crisis I would like to recall that last June the ILO Conference adopted a Global Jobs Pact a set of recommendations addressed to member states, employers, workers and organisations of the multilateral system to recover from the crisis based on decent work. The GJP also called for the shaping of a fair and sustainable globalization. The Pact specifically acknowledges the need to avoid a downward spiral in labour conditions in times of crisis. It stresses the need to respect fundamental principles and rights at work. starting with freedom of association and collective bargaining, which are

enabling rights without which other labour rights cannot be upheld. The Global Jobs Pact further acknowledges that in the recovery a number of ILO Conventions and Recommendations in areas like employment policy, wages, social security, the employment relationship, the termination of employment, labour administration and inspection, migrant workers, labour conditions in public contracts, occupational safety and health, working hours and social dialogue mechanisms will have to be promoted. Many of these standards are relevant for the discussion we are having today and it is hoped that member states will use the crisis to give priority to the ratification and implementation of these standards and that employers will also uphold the rights enshrined in these standards in their operations.

What can unions do?

Let me now turn to what trade unions can do.

It is worth recalling that the majority of the accidents and diseases in the workplaces are preventable hence prevention should be given the highest priority at enterprise, national and international levels.

Trade unions have a fundamental role to play in this regard. One of the most effective measures to reduce injury and illness is the involvement of workers and their representatives in all aspects of occupational safety and health at national and enterprise level. Independent research has confirmed that workplaces with active trade union health and safety representatives have a better health and safety record than workplaces where there is no trade union presence. Health and safety representatives - particularly in the current crisis context – have an essential role to play in investigating any potential hazards or complaints from workers, carry out workplace health and safety inspections and

take up health and safety problems with management to identify solutions. It is equally important that employers engage with health and safety representatives or safety committees in order to ensure that workplaces are safe and healthy.

Trade union safety representatives and joint management-union health and safety committees should therefore be established as is already required in many countries.

Tripartite consultations at national level between governments, employers and trade unions are also an important tool to address problems in occupational safety and health and design strategies to overcome them. The implementation of the global jobs pact at national level offers an important opportunity to engage in a dialogue on improvements of occupational safety and health.

As I mentioned ILO Conventions and Recommendations have a fundamental role to play in the promotion of safe and healthy working conditions. Member states should have as a priority to ratify and effectively implement ILO standards, starting with ILO Convention 155 on occupational safety and health, Convention 161 on health services, Conventions on OSH related to specific hazardous sectors like construction, agriculture, mining and chemicals, Convention 162 concerning safety in the use of asbestos and Convention 187 on the promotional framework for Occupational Safety and Health and its accompanying Recommendation.

A fundamental strategy to improve the situation of occupational safety and health lies in law enforcement. It is therefore important to strengthen labour inspection at national level. Here as well the ILO provides useful guidance with its standards on labour inspection. Penalties need to be imposed for those employers in serious breach of OSH regulation.

Collective bargaining is also key to improve occupational safety and health and should therefore be strengthened. This implies the recognition by member states and employers of the right of workers to organise. Here too, the implementation of the ILO Global Jobs Pact at national level offers real opportunities for improvement of occupational safety and health through the effective recognition of the right to organise and negotiate collective agreements.

Information, training and advice on occupational safety and health for workers and employers is another important element in the prevention of accidents and diseases in the workplaces.

The trade union strategy to improve occupational safety and health also lies in our efforts to improve contractual conditions and promote stable employment. This is all the more important in light of the economic crisis we are facing. Already before the crisis we had seen a trend towards deregulation and increase in precarious working conditions which had negative consequences for workers' health and safety. The economic crisis will now put an extra burden on workers, as raising unemployment and the pressure for keeping jobs and income together with attempts by employers to cut costs may well lead to further exploitation and degradation in working conditions.

We therefore need more than ever to continue to work towards the implementation of decent jobs. Jobs that entail rights and good working conditions, jobs that recognize the right to organise and bargain collectively and the right to safe and healthy conditions.